



Arabic Calligraphy

Naskh script for beginners





THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Arabic Calligraphy

Naskh script for beginners



Text and calligraphy Mustafa Ja'far

Introduction

Arabic is both a language and a script. Originally, as a purely spoken language, it was used at the courts of the powerful Arab tribal confederations such as the Lakhmids and the Ghassanids, who were famed for their tradition of oral poetry. These confederations were based in southern Iraq and Syria, lands which were ruled by the Byzantines, who controlled the Mediterranean countries, and by the Sasanians, who ruled Iraq and Iran. With the birth of the Islamic state in Arabia after AD 622, these lands eventually became part of the Islamic empire. Arabic belongs to the same family of scripts as Hebrew, Greek and Latin, all of which derive ultimately from the Phoenician alphabet developed in the late second millennium BC. The origin of the Arabic letter shapes is still a matter of scholarly debate, but it seems most likely that they are derived from the form of Aramaic script used by the Nabataeans, whose sumptuous capital, Petra, still survives in present-day Jordan.

Arabic was the language in which the Qur'an, the Holy Book of the Muslims, was revealed through the intermediary of the Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad outside Mecca in the early seventh century AD, and the script in which it was subsequently written down. The language and the script were thus endowed with great sanctity and every effort was made when copying the Qur'an and other religious texts to write as beautifully as possible. In the early period, the style of script used for religious texts and subsequently for monumental inscriptions was an angular one, commonly known as Kufic. Everyday

correspondence, at that time on papyrus, was written in a more rounded cursive script. The angular script, which, by the twelfth century, had become increasingly elaborate and embellished, was gradually superseded by more legible cursive scripts, one of which was Naskh.

The expansion of Islam from Spain to the west, into Africa and as far east as Indonesia led to the widespread diffusion of the Arabic language and script. Because it is incumbent upon Muslims to read and recite the Qur'an in its original Arabic, the language was frequently learnt alongside local languages. In many cases the Arabic script displaced local scripts, taking it beyond the sphere of the Arabic language itself. It was employed to write a whole variety of languages such as Persian, Urdu, Dari, Ottoman Turkish (until the reforms of Ataturk in 1928, when the Roman Turkish alphabet replaced it) and until relatively recently some of the languages of Indonesia and Malaysia. After scripts using the Roman alphabet, Arabic is the most commonly written script in the world.

The Arabic script continues to fascinate and inspire. The famous Persian calligrapher, Mir 'Af of Herat (d. 1556), gave the following advice to those embarking on the task: 'The calligrapher needs five things: a fine temperament, an understanding of calligraphy, a good hand, the ability to endure pain and a perfect set of implements.'

Venetia Porter

Department of Oriental Antiquities, The British Museum

Naskh script

Naskh, which literally means to copy or the copyist's hand, is one of the six major cursive Arabic scripts, the *al-qulūm al-sittah* (six pens or styles) that were established during the tenth century AD. The origins of Naskh can be traced back to the late eighth century AD, but at that time the script lacked refinement and was used mainly for correspondence.

When Ibn Muqlah, the great Abbasid calligrapher and vizier (d. 940), subjected the six cursive scripts to rigorous proportional analysis, Naskh became the most popular script for book copying. However, the elegant refinements which elevated Naskh to the realms of a script suitable for the Qur'an are usually attributed to Ibn al-Bawwāb (d. 1022), the second great calligrapher of the Abbasid period.

In the thirteenth century the style of Ibn al-Bawwāb was made more graceful by Yaqūt al-Mustarṣimī, the last great

calligrapher of the Abbasids (d. 1296). Yaqūt al-Mustarṣimī was also responsible for making changes to the shape of the reed pen that had a remarkable effect on all six scripts. He steepened the angle of the writing edge of the pen and left it thicker.

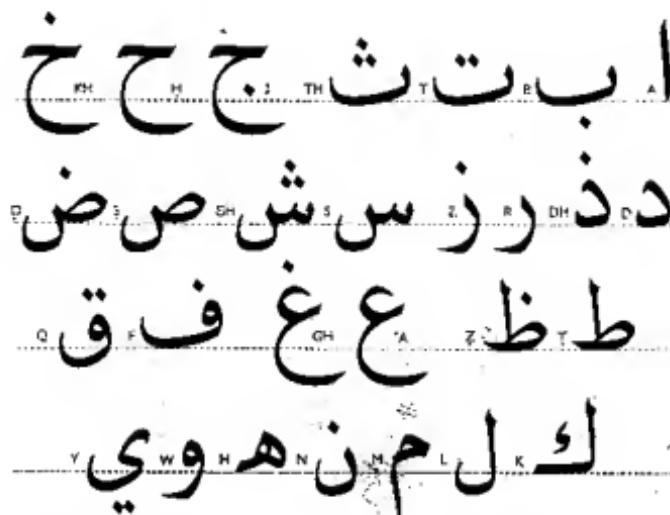
In the fifteenth century the Ottoman Turks favoured Naskh as the most congenial script for copying the Qur'an. They set it apart for this task, labelled it *Māhadīn al-Qur'ān* (servant of the Qur'an) and raised it to new levels of perfection. But it was not until the nineteenth century that Naskh was to reach its peak, at the hands of Kācasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (d. 1876) and Mehmed Şevki Efendi (d. 1887), in Istanbul. Their supremely beautiful Naskh has inspired calligraphers ever since.

Naskh is still the most widely used Arabic script today, with more Qur'āns copied in it than in all other scripts put together.

The Arabic alphabet

Arabic, like Hebrew and Aramaic, is written from right to left and its alphabet consists of 28 consonants. Short vowels are represented by signs above and below the letters (see page 18). The alphabet is written here in the unjoined forms of the Naskh script. The Roman letters indicate a sound equivalent to that of the Arabic.

The fine grey horizontal rules serve as a base line.



Letter variations

Most Arabic letters vary according to their position in the word (initial, medial or final) and whether they are joined or unjoined. The letters below are the five variations of *هـ* (H) in Naskh script. Some scripts have fewer variations. Some of the variations of each letter are given on the explanatory pages, and some on pages 19 to 21.



Getting started

Today, when it comes to calligraphy tools, we are spoilt for choice. Art shops offer a variety of writing implements, with nibs of steel, glass, nylon fibres, etc., in many different shapes and sizes. But the best tool for Arabic calligraphy was, and still is, the reed pen. It is not only more practical than most of the ready-made pens, but it is cheaper too. It allows you to create a writing implement that suits your own hand posture and writing angle, rather than having to adapt your hand to a ready-made pen. The ideal reed, which grows in swamps and shallow waters, is prepared only when it is completely dry. It is cut with a heavy-duty knife or scalpel. Follow these five steps to prepare your first reed pen.

Writing angle

Before you tackle the alphabet, test your pen by drawing some diamond-shaped dots. The pen should rest comfortably between the lower knuckles of the thumb and the first finger, as in the illustration. Press the pen diagonally on the paper and pull it in the direction of the arrows. When you manage to draw a diamond-shaped dot with a single short diagonal stroke that means you are holding your pen correctly. If not, try



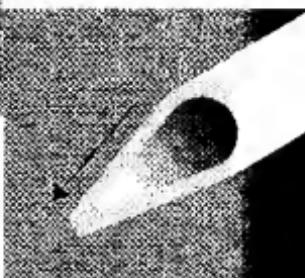
Select a reed stem and cut it to the length of a pen (about 20 cm). The diameter should be around 1cm. If you do not have access to suitable reeds, you can use small bamboo sticks available at garden centres or buy a ready-cut reed pen from an art shop that specializes in calligraphy materials and recut it to the appropriate angle.



again. Make sure the full width of the slanted nib is touching the paper and that your pen is moving in the direction of the arrows. This is the basic writing angle, but when you begin to copy individual letters or words you will find that a certain amount of pen manipulation is necessary to achieve a pleasing contrast of stroke widths.

Ink and ink jar

Inks suitable for practising include black Indian ink, Rotring black drawing ink, and any calligraphy ink. In order not to flood the pen you need to make an ink jar. Find a small watertight jar or plastic film container. In the past calligraphers placed a small wad of raw-silk fibres inside the jar, but nowadays a small piece of nylon tights or stockings does just as well. Push this into the jar and pour in enough ink to be completely absorbed by the fabric. No excess ink is required, as the source of ink must be the ink-dampened fabric. This prevents overloading the pen and creating unsightly blobs.



Work at the end furthest from any bulge. Hold the reed firmly and cut away a long scrap using a sharp knife or scalpel.



ابث خ ذ ز ش

Guidelines

To prepare your practice sheet, use a soft pencil to draw the base line (middle line). Then draw the upper and lower lines at equal distances from the base line using the height of the letter *alif* as a guide. In Naskh script the height of *alif* should equal five dots of your pen placed one on top of the other. Use a white fairly smooth matt paper for practising.

Stroke-by-stroke guide

The unique stroke-by-stroke instructions on the following pages show you the best way of writing each letter of the alphabet. Try to write slowly, following the instructions, and moving your pen in the direction of the arrows.

To create the shoulders, make a cut on each side, taking care to create an end with parallel sides. Aim for a nib width of about 4 mm or less.



Place the reed on a hard surface. Make a slit down the middle of the nib. No slit is required if the width of the nib is less than 4 mm.

Proportions

Proportioned letters like this are designed to help you appreciate the correct shape of each letter. The diagonal-shaped dot represents one full pen width, while the circle indicates half that width. The proportions should serve as a guide only and need not be strictly adhered to.



Learning stages

As a beginner, your learning process should be divided into three basic stages, as in this booklet:

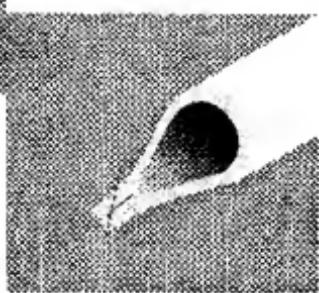
- 1 *Mufradat*: single letters (pages 8-18)
- 2 *Murakkabat*: joined letters (pages 19-21)
- 3 *Kalimat*: words (pages 22-25)

You should only move to the next stage when you feel comfortable with the previous one.



Extra effort!

Do not despair if you find these four letters extremely difficult to write. They are indeed considered the most arduous of all the letters, and beginners should give them extra effort.



Cut the nib to an angle of about 45°. The angle will depend on your hand and you may have to recut the nib to achieve a satisfactory writing angle. Dip the pen in the ink jar and allow it to absorb plenty of ink before you start.

Stage One: *Muṣawwah*: single letters

Strokes



alif

Initial, medial unjoined and final unjoined



Proportions



One variation of each letter is written very large so that the shapes and pen angles are as clear as possible. You will find it much easier to write smaller.

Variations



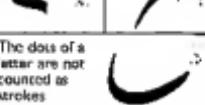
Medial joined
Final joined

There is another form of *alif* known as *alif magṣūrah*, or restricted (used at the end of the word only) which is similar to the final unjoined and joined *yā'* below, but with no dots beneath it.

This is the 28th letter of the alphabet. It is placed here in order to accommodate the three similar letters *ħā*, *tā'* and *thā'* on the opposite page. The correct alphabetic order is featured on page 5.

yā'
Final unjoined

Strokes



1 2 3

The dots of a letter are not counted as strokes

Proportions



Variations

ي Initial

ي Medial

ي Final joined

bā'

Final unjoined



Variations

ب ب ب

Final joined

Medial

Initial

Strokes

2



tā'

Final unjoined



Variation of the letter:
same as bā', but with two dots above and no dot below

Proportions



thā'

Final unjoined



Variation of the letter:
same as bā', but with three dots above and no dot below

jīm

Final unjoined



Variations



Final joined

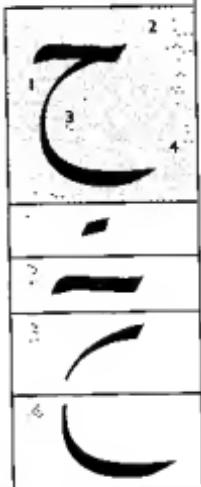


Medial



Initial

Strokes



Tip: Use the right corner of your nib to outline and fill in the lower end of the letter marked here in black.

Proportions



khā' Final unjoined



Variation of the ferrat:
same as jīm, but the dot placed above

hā' Final unjoined



Variation of the letter:
same as jīm, but with no dot

Strokes**Proportions****Variation**

dāl
Initial, medial unjoined and final unjoined

dāl
Initial, medial unjoined and final unjoined

**Strokes****Proportions****zay**

Initial, medial unjoined and final unjoined



Variation of the letter same as rā', but with a dot above

rā'

Initial, medial unjoined and final unjoined

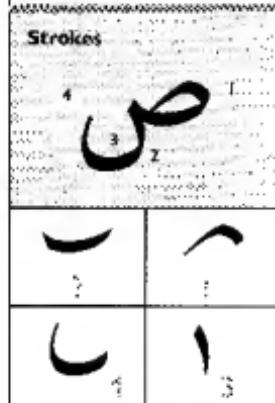
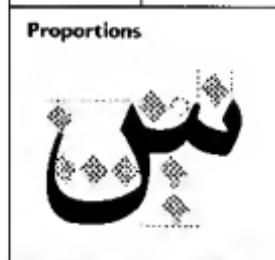


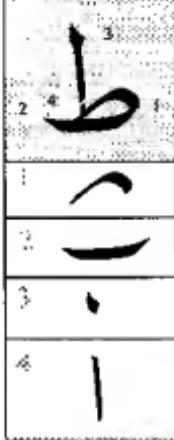
Tips: Use the right corner of your nib to outline and fill in the lower end of the letter marked here in black

Variation

Medial joined
Final joined





Strokes**Proportions****Final unjoined****Variations*****ayn Final unjoined****Variations**

Final joined

Medial

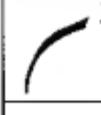
Initial

Proportions

Tip: Use the right corner of your nib to outline and fill in both the top crescent and the lower end of the letter marked here in black.

Strokes

Use the right corner of your nib to outline and fill in the crescent

ghayn**Final unjoined**

Variation: same as *ayn, but with a dot above

Strokes

ف

ه

fā' Final unjoined

Proportions



ف

Variations

ف ف ف

Final joined

Medial

Initial

Strokes

ق

ه

qāf Final unjoined

Proportions



ق

Variations

ق ق ق

Final joined

Medial

Initial

Strokes

Proportions

Variations

kāf
Final unjoined

Tip: Use the right corner of your nib to outline and fill in the end of this special horzah of the letter kāf.

For further variations of *initial* and *medial* forms of the letter kāf see pages 19 and 20.

Proportions

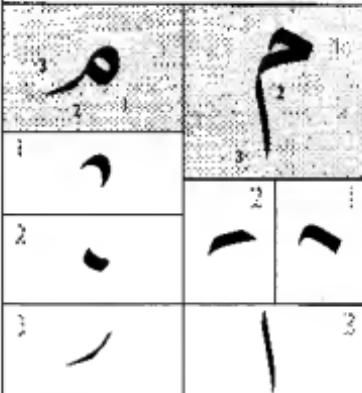
lām Final unjoined

Strokes

Variations

lām
Final unjoined

Strokes



mīm

Alternative final unjoined



Proportions



Tips: Use the right corner of your nib to outline and fill in the end of the letter marked here in black:



nūn Final unjoined



Variations

ذ Initial

ڏ Medial

ڻ Final joined

Proportions



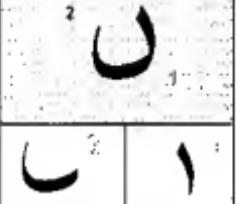
mīm
Final unjoined



Variations



Strokes



Proportions



hā'

Initial



Variations



Medial



Medial



Final joined



Final unjoined

For the proportions of the various forms of this letter see pages 20 and 21.

Strokes



Proportions



wāw Initial, medial unjoined and final unjoined

Variation



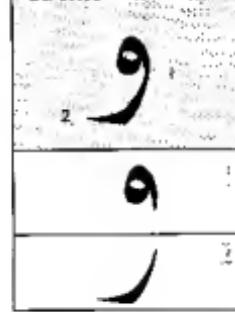
Medial joined

Final joined



Tip: Use the right corner of your nib to outline and fill in the lower end of the letter marked here in black.

Strokes



Proportions



Stage Two: مُؤْكَلَاتٌ joined letters

This section is designed to show as many joined letters as a beginner should need to practise at this stage. To illustrate all forms of joined letters is beyond the scope of this manual.



1 Initial 'alif' has two different forms:

(a) closed if it is followed by an ascending letter (1a).

(b) open if it is followed by a descending letter (1a, 1b).

2 Notice how 'dal' is written above the base line by one dot

6 Final joined 'kaf' has a different form and proportions from the unjoined one. Compare this joined 'kaf' with the large unjoined version on page 15.

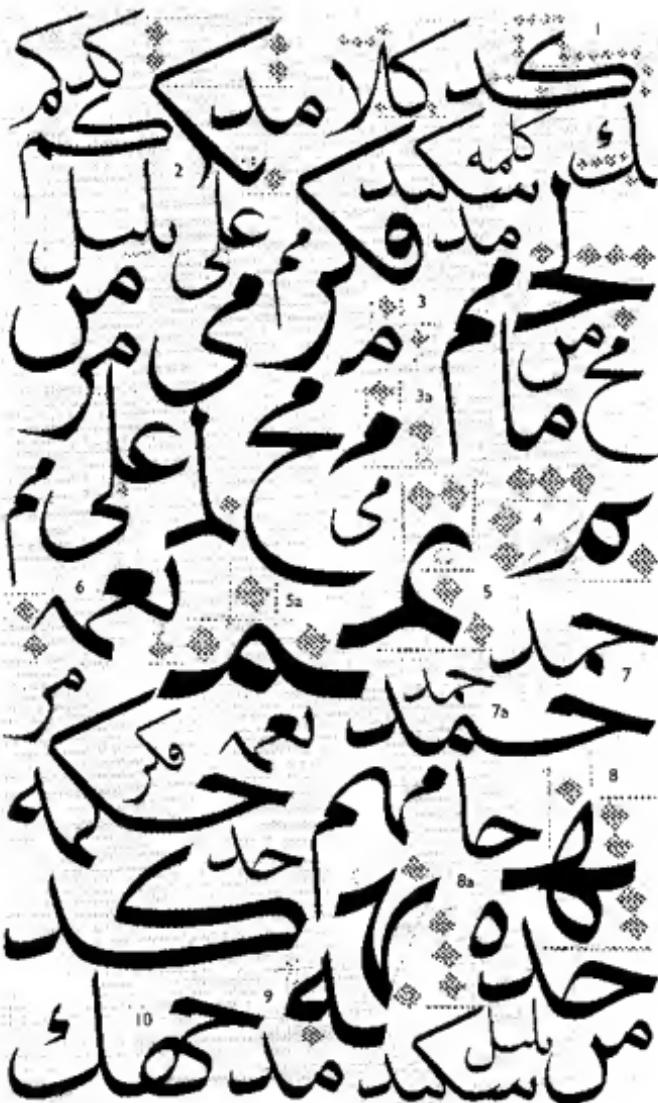
2 The gradual narrowing of this stroke is achieved by twisting the pen very slightly clockwise.

3, 4 The proportions of initial 'ayn are dictated by whether it is followed by a descending (3) or an ascending (4) letter.

5 Initial 'kaf', known as 'kaf soj'i (sword like), followed by different letters.

7 Another initial 'kaf', known as 'kaf zamodd' (arm like).

1 Proportions of initial kof zanwadi:
This kof can also
be used as medial.



2 Proportions
of medial kaf
soft

3, 3a Two forms
of initial mim.

5, 5a Two forms
of medial mim.

4 Final joined
mim.

7, 7a The word
hmad (praise)
written in two
ways using two
different medial
mim.

8, 8a Two
forms of medial
ha'

9 Final joined
ha'.

6 One way of
writing the
word nr'mah
(bounty).
Notice the
varying
thicknesses of
the strokes and
the position of
the letters in
relation to the
base line.

10 Another
form of
medial ha'



1, 1a Two forms of final *hā'* when preceded by the letters *dāl* or *dhāl*.

3, 3a Final *yū'* or final *alif* *maqṣurah*.

5 Some of the letters that can join *yā'* *sayfi* (see 4).

6 Extendable letters. The extended width of any of these letters should be between 9 and 12 dots of the pen.

8, 9 Proportions of *lamif* (the letters *lām* and *alif* combined). Some consider *lamif* as one letter of the alphabet.

12 Proportions of joined *lamif*. See 8 and 9 for unjoined forms.

2 Proportions of one form of medial *hā'*.

4 Variations of final joined *alif* *maqṣurah* or *yā'*, known as *yā'* *sayfi* (sword like) or *yā'* *rājrah* (returning *yā'*).

7 Initial *rā'* known as *rā'* *rahman*. This form of *rā'* cannot be used to write the letter *zay*.

10 Special form reserved for writing the three joined letters of Allah, the name of God. Initial *alif* should be added at the beginning to complete the name.

11 One form of the name of the Prophet Muhammad.

Stage Three: Kethāfī words

The Arabic words below have been selected to demonstrate not only all the single unjoined letters of the alphabet, but also many of the variations of joined initial, medial and final letters.

Different pens have been used, hence the variation in size. The fine grey horizontal lines are base line guides. Practise by emulating each word several times until you achieve a satisfactory result.

ذئب منفخ نبات دار باب

būb dog

dār house

nabat plant

mīnfiqh viscous

mīnfiqh viscous

dhib neck

دجاج فلاج نهان خطاط

khotṭajt calligraphy

zamde love

falākh former

dajjāj like... like...

انسان بياج معروف تقاق

zuqiq blenny

ma'rūf known

rīyāh voice

insān human

نباح مشترك قلائع الحكماء

al-hukmā' wise men

qibā' firs

mashālik crenels

nibāh noise

خراش قماش (أليه ناس

nás nás-n

rəyəh bənəc

qırmızı rəyəh

mährədən nəs-n

استيقاظ لصوص اغراض عرض

zəmərələtəməzən

ağħnejid jaġid

ħajnej id-ħawn

istiqazet waqt -

2.3
4.1
1.1
1.1

مهلة كرة وحيد اصابع

asbēg qums

wahid ġuwiċ

kuruh luu

muhleħ paxx

نادي هندرو سليمان ماء

mađi waqt

Sultimán bejnum

ħaduū' luu

nádi dluu

بِحَجَّةِ حَمَّالِيَّةِ كَتَابِيْ بِلَدِيْ

bahaduhi بَاهَادُهُ يَ

laddbi لَدَبِيْ يَبْرَأُ

himayek هِمَاءِكَيْ

balyah بَلْيَاهُ يَ

شَرِيكٌ شَلِيلٌ مِنْ مَعِيشَةِ يَهْجَانٍ بِنَفْخَهِ

yanfakh يَنْفَخُهُ سَوْدَانَ

al-jan الْجَانُ

al-mafshati الْمَفْسَحَاتِ

aphabet أَبْهَابِطُ

sharif شَارِفٌ

جَوِيْ يَقْنُعُ شَكْرَ حَكَهِ

jukmoh جُوكْمَهُ

shuk شُوكٌ

yogfizne يُوقِفِيزِنْجُ

juwari جُوَارِي

بَطَلَ صَافِ حَمَّ الْلَّبَنِ الْأَعْتَادِ

al-fimad الْفِيمَادُ

al-labas اللَّبَاسُ

muhim مُهِمٌ

jaří جَارِي

batolos بَاتُولُوسُ

وَقَوَامُهُ فِي كُثُرَةِ الْمِسْقَ وَدَوَامُهُ

'Calligraphy is hidden in the teachings of the master, and its betterment lies in ample and continuous practice.'

Attributed to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth Caliph (d.661)

كمال فائض حرف نستهلك

nəstəlik /nə stəlik/

hifz /hifz/

fazıl /fazıl/

Kamal /kəməl/

ساحر مستمع ناسخ بيتلبيني صاغ

səlīgh /səlīgh/

yəmbitəni /yəmbitəni/

nəsikh /nəsikh/

mürəkkəb /mürəkkəb/

səhər /səhər/

بِلْتَجْهَ طَائِشْ بَعْدَكُمْ مَلْزَمْ

mələzəm /mələzəm/

ba'dukum /ba'dukum/

tələsh /tələsh/

beltejəh /beltejəh/

يتساق الشجرة قلم خبرتك في بعض

qəbədə /qəbədə/

khibratuka /khibratuka/

qəlem /qəlem/

el-shəjərə /el-shəjərə/

yotəsəbbəq /yotəsəbbəq/

الخط محفى في تعليم الأستاذ

Gallery

Unlike some scripts such as Jali Thuluth, Tughra and Jali Diwāni which have been treated in imaginative and experimental ways, Naskh, a script favoured for its clarity and legibility and therefore sometimes considered 'ordinary', has not in the past been subjected to more individual interpretations. A text in Naskh is usually written to be accessed easily or to be read. Here are some attempts to break with this tradition. The four featured pieces are intended to be primarily visual compositions.

A man belongs where he settles, and not where he grew up; where he is now, and not where he was born. Ancient Arabic proverb

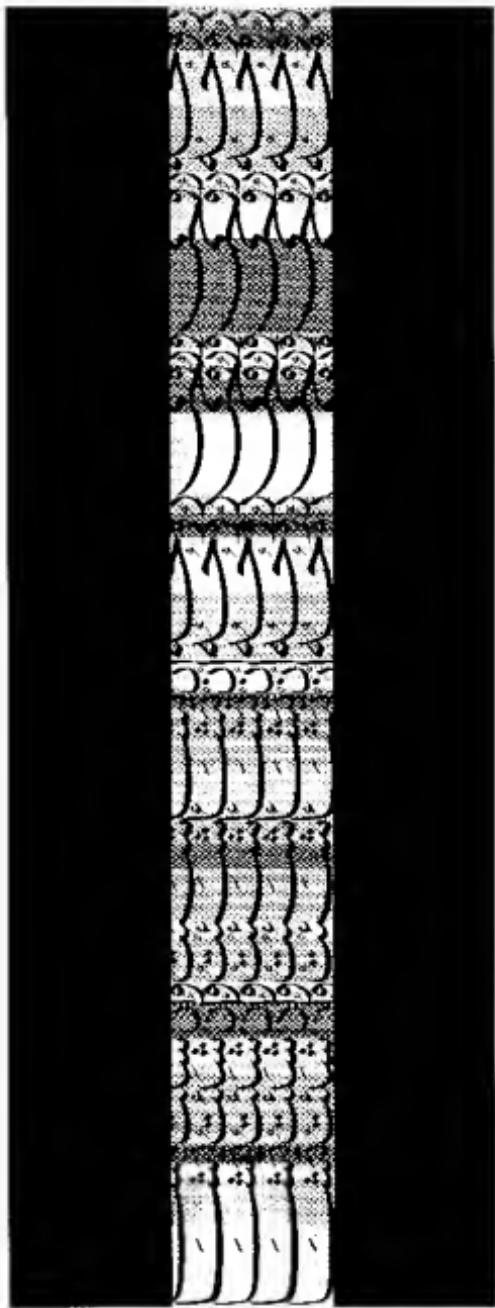


'The letter is a veil and the veil is a letter' al-Naffari (d.965)



حرف حجاب واجباب حرف

الله
يَعْلَمُ
الْمُسْتَقْبِلَ



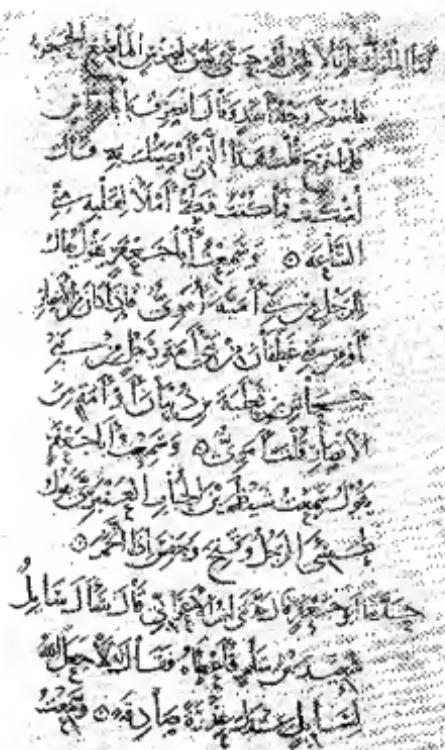
Verse from a poem by al-Hallaj (cf. 922)

Naskh past and present

Naskh is one of the oldest Arabic scripts still in use today. Its survival is due partly to the fact that it is the script used to write the Qur'an throughout the Islamic world. Its worldwide use has led to the development of many variations.

For centuries novice calligraphers have begun with the practice of Naskh, a tradition which is still maintained. There seems little doubt that the supreme beauty of the script will continue to be appreciated by people from many parts of the world for many years to come.

Following is a selection of pieces in Naskh script, from a variety of periods and places, showing its versatility.



A page from *Kitab al-Amali* by Ibn Babawayh (d. 994) written in what is known as Warragi script (Naskh-Taqiq) by Muhammed ibn Asad (d. 1019 in Baghdad). Ibn Asad was one of the most illustrious calligraphers of his age and master of the famous calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab (d. 1022).



Surah CXIV (al-Nis) 'Hankind', and the colophon of a copy of the Qur'an written in Istanbul by Shaykh Hamdullah (1429-1520). In this copy, which was completed in 1514, the master signed his name with a reference to his grey hair, old age, shaky head and poor health. Shaykh Hamdullah produced forty-seven copies of the Qur'an in all and was known as qatib al-kutub, the calligraphers' rooster.



Surah 1 (al-Fatiha), 'The Opening', from a copy of the Qur'an written in Istanbul in 1683 by Hafiz Osman (1642-98). Osman, who was the calligraphy master of the Ottoman Sultans Mustafa II and Ahmed III, had developed a Naskh style that is distinguished by its clarity. This style became the standard for those who copied the Qur'an after him.

وَيَعْلَمُ بِعِصْمَتِهِ وَهُوَ مُبْرِزٌ
سَعِيَ الْمُنْزَلِ بِعَصْمَهِ فِي سَعِيِ
وَغَرَافِهِ سَعِيَ الْمُنْزَلِ بِعَصْمَهِ
شَارِقَةِ الْمُنْزَلِ بِعَصْمَهِ
وَلِدَنَادِ الْمُنْزَلِ بِعَصْمَهِ
عَلَيْهِ دَلَالَاتِ الْمُنْزَلِ بِعَصْمَهِ
سَلَكَ دَرِيَّةِ الْمُنْزَلِ بِعَصْمَهِ
سَعِيَ الْمُنْزَلِ بِعَصْمَهِ

إِذَا جَاءَهُ نَصْرُ اللَّهِ وَالْفَتحُ هُنَّ دَرَيْتَ الْكَاسَ
يَدْخُلُونَ فِي دِينِ اللَّهِ أَوْلَمْ يَهُنَّ صَبَّعَ حَمْدُوكَ
وَأَسْتَغْفِرُهُ لَهُ كَانَ تَوَابًا هُنَّ

Surah CX (el-Nasr) 'Succour', from a copy of the Qur'an printed in Saudi Arabia in 1993. It is written in a modern and elegant Naskh by Osman Taha.

لِهِمْ وَلِلَّهِ الْأَحْمَنُ الْجَنَاحِ

إِذَا جَاءَهُ نَصْرُ اللَّهِ وَالْفَتحُ هُنَّ دَرَيْتَ الْكَاسَ
يَدْخُلُونَ فِي دِينِ اللَّهِ أَوْلَمْ يَهُنَّ صَبَّعَ حَمْدُوكَ
رَبِّكَ وَأَسْتَغْفِرُهُ لَهُ كَانَ تَوَابًا هُنَّ

Surah CX (el-Nasr) 'Succour', written in what is known as Indian Naskh, with a translation of the verses in Urdu. This copy of the Qur'an was printed in Saudi Arabia in 1989 with no reference to the calligrapher's name.

لِهِمْ وَلِلَّهِ الْأَحْمَنُ الْجَنَاحِ
إِنَّ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ فِي لَيْلَةِ الْقَدْرِ ۝ وَمَا أَدْرِكَ مَا لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ ۝
لَيْلَةُ الْقَدْرِ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ أَلْفِ شَهْرٍ ۝ نَزَّلَ اللَّهُكَهُ وَالرُّوحُ فِيهَا
بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ مِّنْ كُلِّ أَمْرٍ ۝ سَلَامٌ هُنَّ حَتَّىٰ مَطْلَعِ الْفَجْرِ ۝

Surah XCIVII (al-Qadr) 'Predestination', beautifully written in bold modern Naskh that carries vestiges of older styles. This copy of the Qur'an was printed in Britain. Neither the production date nor the name of the calligrapher is given.

الخطُّ مُخْفِيٌّ في تعلِيمِ الأُسْتَاذِ وقوامةُ في كثرةِ المَشْقِ ودوامِهِ

Arabic desktop publishing fonts based on Naskh script, though functional, are widely used, look very rigid and mechanical when compared with handwritten scripts. For this reason new copies of the Qur'an are still reproduced from originals handwritten by renowned calligraphers and not typeset.

Compare this piece of typesetting with the same sentence written in Naskh across the bottom of pages 24 and 25.

'Do not be afraid of failure, or indeed of copying too slavishly. Once these processes have become part of your experience, your self will ensure that the letters become your own.'

Donald Jackson